

# Status of Women in Karbi Society: Continuity and Change

Ms. Sangita Das

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Eastern Karbi Anglong College, Karbi Anglong, Assam, India

---

## ABSTRACT

The present study on the status of Karbi women in Karbi society is an endeavour to understand the present social position of Karbi women, especially in Karbi Anglong District. Karbi Anglong district is still remain in darkness of underdevelopment in terms of development in comparison to other districts of Assam but instead of having hindrance in development, Karbi women are presently growing their outlook for progress. The study has been carried out in Karbi Anglong District and the area of research was the urban and rural areas of Diphu and Bokajan subdivision. The unit of study were Karbi women and samples were collected through stratified random sampling. The present study has been carried out among 500 Karbi women from rural and urban area between the age group 18-62 years. Data has been collected through stratified random sampling and through both qualitative and quantitative method.

**Key words:** - Change, Continuity, Karbi, Tradition, Women.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Since the primitive time, Karbi women have been bearing a great role in maintaining social order by their immense passion and balanced attitude. Ever Since the perception of Karbi society, Karbi women have been maintaining the prescriptive rules and restriction ascertained by their customary law and the social system. The Karbis have been following patriarchal family system, where the father or the male members play the role of head of the family. Female were not allowed to own the headship of the family but they have been maintain homogeneous relationship with family members as well as relatives by obeying all the duties and responsibilities. In outdoor religious rites and rituals, male members significantly performed all the activities and women's were not allowed to interfere, however women performed the indoor religious rites and rituals.

To study the present status of Karbi women, it is worthwhile to focus on their social position in primitive time. In primitive Karbi society, King had enjoyed superior position in socio-political entity and considered as the chief of the Karbis. In political sphere, the participation of women was almost none. Women's were not allowed to remain in any political decision making process or did not participate in the political activities. Even the wife of the King (Lindokpo) was also not allowed to attend in any political activities. In the economic sphere, the role of women was great because they performed various activities in the agricultural field (Jhum field), collect vegetables from forest, works in kitchen garden etc. All these activities helped the family to sustain their life in a easy way.

J. Bhattacharjee in his book "Sociology of Karbis" (1986) has mentioned that, in the primitive Karbi societies, female were dominated by the patriarchal culture and occupied a inferior social status.<sup>1</sup> Males were regarded as the backbone of social, political, religious and economic life whereas women in general remained in the background in all the aspects of their social life. In the traditional Karbi society, Karbi women had played predominant role in child bearing, rearing and looked after the comforts of husbands and managed all the household works.

Representing about the social status of Karbi women, an English anthropologist Evans Pritchard (2009) said that, "Looking at her socio-economic position from outside and from our point of view, we may say that she has an inferior position and she is not resentful on account of it. She sees herself as different from man and as having a social status different from him, but if we may state her attitude in our own way of speaking, it is for her less a matter of level than of difference of status. Primitive women do not see themselves as under privilege class against

---

<sup>1</sup> Bhattacharjee (1986) , "The Sociology of Karbis." P-28

a class of men with whom they seek to gain social equality. They also never heard to social equality and also do not want to be like men.”<sup>2</sup>

From the above comment it can be assume that in the primitive Karbi society though Karbi women had an inferior social status and never got an equal position similar to men but they never though the matter in a serious way. Even they had passed a satisfied life with their prescriptive duties, responsibilities, and rules. From the present times point of view , it seems a negligible phenomena for the women of the respective society , but that course of time, most of the Karbi women were illiterate, did not feel the touch of modernity , lived an isolated life which was far away from the other communities people.

According to the writing of Kabeen Teronpi, in the primitive Karbi society, several restrictions were imposed to the Karbi women, Likely

- Women were forbidden from using umbrella to get protection from sun heat and rain.
- Women were not permitted to cook and served food without the “Vamkok” (girdle) tied to their waist.
- Women were prohibited from wearing shoes and Sandals.
- It was unwarrantable for the Karbi women to wear gold ornaments.
- While walking on the roads, women were not allowed to hand fan.
- Women were not allowed to walk parallel to man.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the present study is to study the changing social status of the Karbi women in this era. Instead of different socio-economic barriers, the Karbi women are changing their outlook for life and they are mostly influencing by modernisation, which helps them to carry out changes in their life throughout all aspects of their life. On the other hand \, instead of having changes in Karbi society, continuity also exists in Karbi society and interesting it the women, who has been preserving the continuity in their society. The present study is highly influenced by those challenges, which has been sustaining certain rigid conservative attitude among them.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present study has been followed by both qualitative and quantitative method and participatory research design has applied. The universe of research is Karbi Anglong district and the unit of the study is households. There are 300 sample households selected through random sampling method from rural, urban and remote hill areas. Primary and secondary data and information are collected through interview and questionnaire method. Women belong to different categories such as jobholders and jobless, housewives and unmarried girls, literate and illiterate women, handicap women are studied to collect relevant information’s for the present study. Field work are conducted on hospitals, schools, charity homes, NGO’s, religious institutions, agricultural fields, *Jhum fields* (shifting cultivation), shops.

### **DISCUSSION**

The first Karbi leader and social reformer Late Semson Sing Engti, who had concerned the matter and he started reformation movement in Karbi society to abolish certain blind practices, which were harmful for the women. Engti did various efforts to wipe away the ill-treatment and injustice meted out towards women. It is the outcome of the restless effort of Semson Sing Engti, that today women are permitted to enjoy a dignified position in the society. <sup>3</sup>

However, there are no relevant writings or written documents are available in favour of Karbi women’s contribution in society. Even though, the Rongpharpi Rongbe statue of Diphu (head quarter of Karbi Anglong district) proved the contribution of women in the history of the Karbis. The statue of Rongpharpi Rongbe is a great statue situated in the middle of the Diphu town and her comrades- a grand sculpture enlivened in the hands of its sculptor. During the migration of the Karbis from in the Kachari Kingdom, they faced various dangerous situations in front of them. Rongpharpi Rongbe was the first Karbi woman who rebelled against exploitation and oppression.

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://wn.com/Dositej\\_obraodovic](http://wn.com/Dositej_obraodovic) E.E.Evans-Pritchard. Ethnographical blog on Karbis earning rave reviews globally 14 Nov 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Teronpi Kabeen ,(2011), 37<sup>th</sup> KYF Lokhimo Semson Sing Engti. P-111



**Images of Rongpharpi Rongbe**

This statue was constructed by Dr. Jayanta Rongpi

#### **Rites of passage of the Karbis and the influence of the Karbi women**

Since the primitive time, Karbi women have been contributing their efforts in the indoor religious activities. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in Karbi society all the outdoor religious activities are generally performed by the males not by the women's, women are only allowed to do the indoor religious activities. Except the religious work, women's participation are very less in other institutional works, especially in political work and decision-making. The Karbi women folk had dominated only the rituals associated with the birth of a child (Klangklo Athekar), marriage (Adam Asar) and the funerary (Chomangkan or Thikarhi). The Karbi women have been taking the leading role in these ceremonies.

**Klangklo Athekar:** - The main purpose of this ritual is to make purification of the newborn baby. The ritual of "Klangklo Athekar" is performed with a view to purify and protecting the new born baby from all types of impurity and all kind of impurity and evil effects as well as satanic forces. In this ritual, male members are restricted to take part. The ritualistic chant that is recited in unison only by the women for the purpose just after the delivery of the baby runs, a few stanza of that song are cited below:

*Karbi aso, karbak aso,  
Hu aso kali, bang aso kali,  
Rang ong kehang, jisi lok kehang,  
Jisi pirthe kahache, mindar kaheche.*

(Gist of the verses:- Oh, god! The baby just delivered is a human child, not animal. It has come to this world to establish relation with that of the human beings and to become human in all respect).

Generally, all the rituals related with the birth ceremony are performed in the house and all the songs have been prevailing in their society as their oral tradition, females have been passing such songs from generation to generation without modifying one single word.

**Adam Asar:** The Karbi marriage ceremony is required both the male and females participation. The Adam Asar marriage ceremony is proceeds through several steps, such as *Nengpi-Nengso Kaching* (women's negotiation) is the first step toward the beginning of Adam Asar marriage ceremony, where the mother of the groom is required to go to the house of the would be bride as casual guest along with two or three married women with one bottle of *Arak*<sup>4</sup>. The mother of the groom express her desire to have a daughter of the particular house as bride for her son as well as her daughter –in-law, during her conversation with the mother on various stray topic. This is the initial stage of marriage, women's participation is most for the success of this ceremony and the consent, and positive response of the mother of the bride is very essential for the further proceeding. *Keptini* (word of confirmation) is the second stage of Adam Asar marriage ceremony. This stage comes after the positive response of the bride and her mother. In this stage also the women plays vital role to decide a tentative date for the marriage. *Ajo-Arni-Kepha* (Fixation of the date for the wedding) is the stage, where the mother of the groom goes to the bride's house with requisite offerings and decides a definite date for the wedding. *Oso Kachinem* (parents admonition before parting) is the another stage when the mother and the father said several important advices to their daughter

*O' Serli jang serme'  
Nang hajong atumke'  
Bang lo mathum lo he'  
Nang harchi kame'  
An sar anghang phuhe....*

(Gist of the verses:- O! Darling you are in-lows (usually maternal uncle) have come to take your hands, since there is none to take care of them at this old age, therefore! Darling please complies with their request by going along with them.)

The above mentioned rituals are some core rituals which are performed by the women and still Karbi women are well equipped in performing these rituals in well managed way. Women's having the knowledge of traditional rituals holds prestigious position in Karbi society and presently the endeavour of the young generation to acquire the traditional rituals and rites are really appraisable.

Before the arrival of British rulers and the Christian missionaries, *Jirkedam* traditional bachelor's dormitory was prevailing in Karbi society through which Karbi boys and girls were trained by the chief of the village *Sarthe* or else by the elder persons of that respective village. There was no restriction for the girls to join the *Jirkedam*. They learnt the traditional songs, dance, music, norms value of their society; they also shared their oral tradition through this institution. Otherwise, women were not allowed to attend any other institutional work during the primitive time.

#### **Role of women in funeral ceremony: -**

The role of Karbi women is unavoidable in the funeral ceremony. *Uchepi* (a group of Karbi women, who sing song during the funeral ceremony. according to the Karbi myth, these women *Uchepi* cook food for the died person for three days and keep the death body for three days. during these days they, sing song for the soul to get heaven. The women not by the men only perform these works. Even men's are not allowed to do to such thing.

During British period, only a few missionaries had came to *Tikapahar* of Present Karbi Anglong district with British officials. Their prime motto was to spread Christian religion in the Karbi society. During that period, there was no separate district allotted for them and present Karbi Anglong district (formerly known as Mikir Hill) was combined with Nagaon district, Golaghat district, Sivasagarh district, Khasi and Jaintia hill district, and North Cachar district. Around 1859, Missionaries arrived to Tikka Pahar by the endeavour of "*Council of Baptist Church of North East India*" to carried out some mission work with vision to spread Christian religion along with literacy. During that period, missionaries spread literacy only a few Karbi men but women's were not interested to get formal education. The missionaries in several places of Karbi Anglong district established school but the student enrolment was very less and women's interest for the schooling was almost zero. Later on, the missionaries and the British government were made a few Karbi men educated and indulged them in their official work but they failed to do that same for the women.

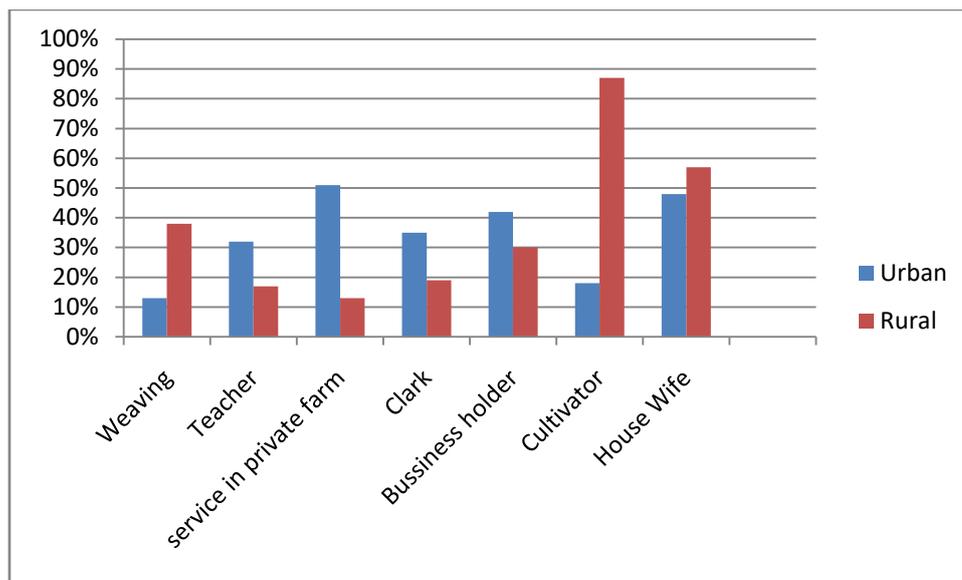
In the post independence period and particularly after the creation of separate district for the Karbis, a change had started to take place in the Karbi society. Gradually, state government and the district council had started to take various initiatives for the development of Karbi Anglong district. Credit also goes to the Karbi leaders, who fought for the upliftment of Karbi women's status by encouraging them to go for schooling. After the formation of "Karbi Anglong autonomous district council," several developmental activities had started in this district and women got proper facility and scope for the development.

<sup>4</sup> Teronpi, Sathi .(1982). *Vojaru Ahi* . In Rongbong Terang & Sailen Das (Ed.

Education can be considered as responsible factor for the change in the status of Karbi women. Literacy had change the outlook of Karbi women and they started to engage them in all the sphere of the society. Presently, Karbi women are bearing dynamic personality, especially the educated women. In recent time, Karbi women are economically independent and fit and started to earn their livelihood by them. They learnt all the developed way to become economically fit, and gave up the age-old tradition to earn money. In politics also, presently modern political system are prevailing in Karbi Anglong district and women are growing and participating in political activities and standing in the same row with the men.

A change in religion has also brought a drastic change in the Karbi society. Presently, those Karbi women who transformed to Christian religion had changed their conservative perspective and doing all the religious activities with the males. They do not have any bar between the men and women. In Lokhimon religion also, only male inherited the priestly position, otherwise all the works are divided equally between the male and female. However, those Karbi people who are still practicing their traditional religion, they are maintaining their age old tradition till today.

Besides religion, education can be considered another factor for the upliftment of the status of Karbi women. Presently, Karbi women are dominating almost all the major sphere of social life. Education enables them to understand their importance in society and family. In the present time, Karbi women are equally well versed in all domains of society and raising their hands for the promotion of the status of other illiterate women and girls. Similarly, economically Karbi women are becoming self reliant and started to cooperate the male members of the family in terms of earning and business. A great nature of Karbi women is enthusiastic. Majority Karbi women are very enthusiastic in works and they interested to sharpen their talent in all works and profession, such as weaving, cooking, cultivation, marketing, handloom, education, business, teaching, engineering, nursing, management etc. The below diagram present the ratio of women engaged in different activities.

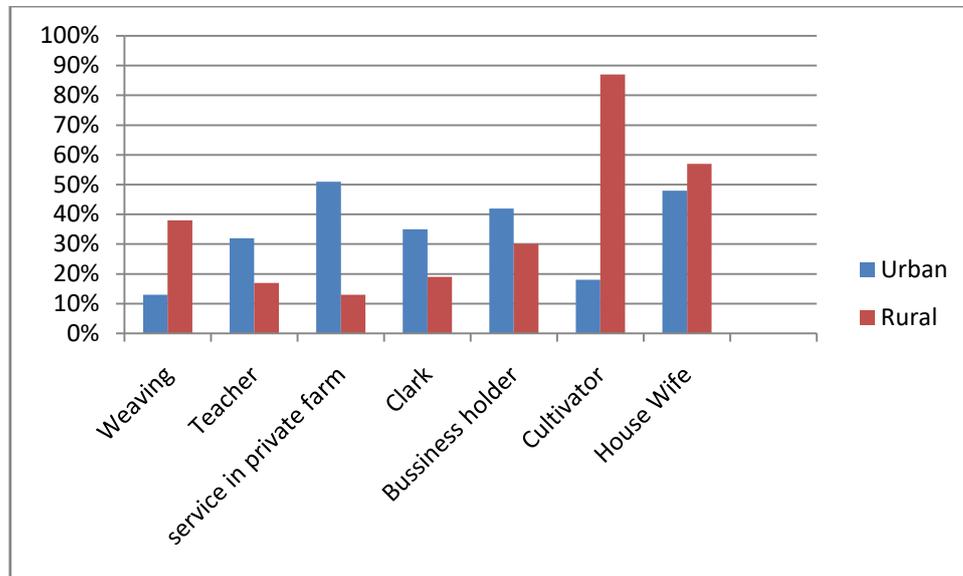


**Diagram-1**

Presently, in most of the local market or weekly market, Karbi women hold a position for their business oriented attitude. It is observed that, in Karbi Anglong district, daily and weekly market holds a special place for the Karbi women, where women use to sale their locally cultivated products and vegetables and forest based products. Field work data furnished the fact that Karbi women generally collect all wild vegetables from forest and sale then in the market with a reasonable price.

Though a considerable change has occurred in the life of Karbi women but in some aspects, still Karbi women are regulating their life by traditional ethics and customary law. In present time, Karbi women use their traditional attire “*Pini Pekok*” during traditional festivals or to solemnised marriage ceremony. In religious performance also women do not participate but indoor rituals are performed by them only. Since the primitive time, Karbi women have possessed excellent aesthetic quality. Devotion for tradition and ritual still exists as a basic nature of Karbi women. Presently, Karbi youths, especially the women are growing their interest in learning weaving and traditional handloom works. State government and Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council also sponsored different types of schemes for the improvement of textile and handloom department. Exhibition in festivals are also attracting the insight of people towards the traditional handloom works of the Karbis.

Regarding child delivery, the traditional process refers the expert village old ladies for child delivery but now a day, institutional delivery system replaced most of the traditional pattern of child delivery system. Presently, now and then illiterate section goes for traditional unsafe pattern of child delivery but rest of the women prefer for institutional delivery of children. The field work report shows that out of 500 women 413 women are interested in institutional delivery whereas 87 women are in favour of delivery at home.



**Diagam-2**

In this connection, it is worthwhile to mention that, though institutional delivery system is getting popularity among the Karbi women from both rural and urban area but the relevant rituals of birth are still remain the same in Karbi society. People have a strong believe on the birth and death rituals and these rituals are varies from religion to religion.

### CONCLUSION

From the above discussion and data, it can be say that Karbi women are preceding towards a progressive way. Ever since the introduction of formal education system in Karbi Anglong District, women gradually started to develop their outlook for formal education. Obviously various social and economic hindrances came in their way for development but their hardworking capacity, progressive attitude, passion and commitment for works lead them towards a developed way. Presently accept the interior and remote village areas, women’s are becoming self reliant and showing their efficiency in almost all spheres, right from national level to village level, from game to service, Karbi women are challenging their competitors. It is worthwhile to mention that though Karbi women are trying to touch the apex of success but certain social system are there , which has drown a curve in front of them. Due to certain socially prescribed rules and regulation, continuation of traditional social system, economic inaccessibility, undeveloped road and communication, most of the Karbi women are deprived from manifest their potentialities and excellence in different fields.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The immediate study is conducted on the Karbi women, who have been silently growing their glorious image in all aspects of their social life. Due to the disrupted communication and geographical isolation, this tribe could not go out from their state they have constructed their own world within this geo-physical environment. Initially, Karbi women were remained untouched from the ray of education, but the arrival British in this region brought a ray of hope for the Karbis and especially for the women to get formal schooling. In the post independence period, gradually, the picture of the social life of this tribe had started to change and gradually they started to achieve value added education after the establishment of Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council. Presently, Karbi women are active in all fields such as education, politics, business and they makes them equivalent to other women’s of different communities.

It is education and modernisation which enables them to reach in a better position and to earn the capacity and quality to relate with the national and international affairs. Presently, professionalism has been developed among them and they are concentrating in almost all types of profession. Tradition and culture is very near and dear to all. Karbis are also not separate from this phenomenon. Cultural revivalism and conservativeness, these are two factors has been influencing in sustain their culture and tradition. Out of the entire study, it can be said that, Karbi women



are very conscious and rigid to maintain the culture and tradition. Though change is a continuous phenomenon, which is recurring the entire Karbi society but in the meanwhile continuity also exists in certain aspects in their social life

#### **Limitation of the study**

The present study has been carried out to understand the changes and continuity in the social status of Karbi women in Karbi Anglong district. However, Study has been conducted in rural, urban and a section of hill surrounded areas but hill front areas are remaining unreachable from this study. An extensive research project is necessary to reach those people, who are still living in unreachable areas, in the dense forest areas of Karbi Anglong district.

#### **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Bhattacharjee, T. (1986), *Sociology of the Karbis*, BR Publishing Corporation, Delhi.
- [2]. Bordoloi, B.N (1987), *Tribes of Assam, Part I*, Tribal Research Institute, Guwahati.
- [3]. Dube, S.C. (1949). *Some Aspects of Tribal Problems*.
- [4]. Elwin, Varrier. (1963), *A New Deal for Tribal India*.
- [5]. Lyall C, J. (1908), *The Mikirs*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati.